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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to dispel myths about preparing program proposals for the American Psychological Association's annual convention. The report's goal is to increase the number of student presenters at future annual conventions. It has been determined that, for a variety of reasons, psychology graduate students participate more in poster sessions than in actual programs. But poster presentations do not guarantee that anyone will attend the poster session or offer feedback, and proposing a poster session actually requires more work than that involved in submitting a symposium proposal. This report details how students can develop a program proposal. The areas covered include the development and titling of topics, conducting literature reviews, proposal preparation, how to submit the proposal to the most appropriate division, what happens if a proposal is accepted, dealing with probable rejection of a proposal by re-writing the proposal for the following year's annual convention, and protecting "ownership" of a rejected proposal idea through publication. Included in each section are tips, strategies, and examples of how to generate a successful program. (RJM)

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HOW TO PREPARE PROGRAM PROPOSALS FOR THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION ANNUAL CONVENTION

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HOW TO PREPARE PROGRAM PROPOSALS FOR THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION ANNUAL CONVENTION

Introduction

Before starting this workshop, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the American Psychological Association Graduate Students for their sponsorship of this program. I owe a special thanks to last year's APAGS Program Chair, Miguel Ybarra, of the University of Wisconsin—Madison, with whom the idea for this program was conceived and proposed, just prior to the close of the 1994 Annual Convention.

The Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association was held in Los Angeles last year. The 1994 Annual Convention featured over 13,000 attendees, while offering over 1,465 programs (APA, 1994) and 6,848 presenters. The Annual Convention typically consists of symposia; poster sessions; discussions; roundtables; workshops; Continuing Education workshops; invited addresses, symposia, workshops, and discussions; awards ceremonies/presentations; master lecture series; and divisional business meetings.

In a statistical analysis of the 1994 Annual Convention (Tentoni, 1995), of the 6,848 presenters at last year's convention, 4,707 (69%) held doctoral degrees of some kind, while 2,141 (31%) held a master's degree or less. There were a total of 9,770 different role opportunities (i.e., chairpersons, presenters, discussants, invited speakers, honorees, poster presenters, etc.) at last year's convention. Of this total, 7,333 (75%) went to doctoral level presenters and only 2,437 (25%) went to sub-doctoral presenters.

There were 53 poster sessions held as a part of the 1,465 total programs at last year's convention. The poster sessions had a total of 3,966 authors/

presenters, or 40.6% of the total number of convention presentation opportunities. There were 2,339 (59%) doctoral level poster presenters, with the remaining 1,627 (41%) going to sub-doctoral poster presenters.

With respect to actual programs (i.e., symposia, discussions, roundtables, workshops, etc.) at last year's convention, there were a total of 5,804 presenters. Of this total, 4,994 (86%) of the program presenters were doctoral level, while only 810 (14%) were sub-doctoral program presenters. The average number of convention roles were 1.55 for doctoral level presenters to 1.13 for sub-doctoral presenters. The average number of actual programs were 1.06 for doctoral presenters to only 0.38 for sub-doctoral presenters. The average number of poster sessions were 0.49 for doctoral presenters to 0.76 for sub-doctoral presenters.

Assuming that all sub-doctoral presenters were psychology students (and it is known some were not), it appears that if a psychology graduate student is to "present" at an Annual Convention, the student will most likely be involved in a poster session. There are very few opportunities for psychology graduate students to present in actual programs. Although psychology graduate students may have comprised 31% of the total participant population at the 1994 Annual Convention, they had access to only 14% of the actual program role opportunities.

Psychology graduate students are not presenting in actual programs for a variety of reasons. Some may be intimidated by the process of preparing a program proposal for review (McCrea, 1992), as this is not an activity typically nurtured or supported by many graduate psychology faculty to the same degree as submitting poster session proposals. Other psychology graduate students may accept the "role of a student" too readily and assume

as a graduate student they are in no position and of no importance to propose a program (Morgan, 1992; Storm, 1994; Thomas, 1992).

The purpose of this workshop is to dispel any myths about preparing program proposals for the Annual Convention. The goal of this workshop is to increase the number of student presenters at future Annual Conventions. The areas that will be covered in detail in this segment of this workshop will deal with: **1)** the development and titling of topics; **2)** conducting literature reviews; **3)** proposal preparation; **4)** selecting the most appropriate division to submit the proposal; **5)** what happens if a proposal is accepted; **6)** dealing with probable rejection of a proposal by re-writing the proposal for the following year's Annual Convention; and **7)** protecting "ownership" of a rejected proposal idea through publication.

Development and Titling of Topics

In looking through the past four or five years of the *APA Annual Convention Program*, what stuck out the most was the large number of poster presenters, and how many of those poster presenters were students. Make no mistake about it, there is no better way to get something accepted in the Annual Convention than to submit it as a poster proposal. APA Divisions can accept more "presenters" through the poster format. The poster format is a very effective means to disseminate information to those attendees interested in specific topics. However, the poster format does not guarantee anyone will attend your poster session or that anyone will interact with you as a poster "presenter". What few of you may not be aware of is that you essentially must do *more work* to propose a poster session than is required to submit a symposium proposal.

One of the first steps in developing a program topic is to actually look at

the *Annual Convention Program* to see what kind of programs *are not* being done. That concept is what led to this very workshop, in addition to the previously mentioned statistical analysis of the *102nd Annual Convention Program* (APA, 1994), which I might add is the first of its kind of which I am aware. There is no such thing as a topic too stupid or inane that a program cannot be built around it.

At the 1982 APA Annual Convention in Washington, D.C., a paper session was presented on "Personality and Self-Image". Two presenters, E. Mazak Bard, of the Akron (Ohio) Public Schools, and Isadore Newman, of the University of Akron, gave a paper entitled, "*Relationship Between Jelly Beans and Adult Personality*" (APA, 1982, p. 109). This paper was a direct reference to former U.S. President Ronald Reagan's fondness for jelly beans. This paper was picked up by all the wire services and received international attention because Bard and Newman linked an individual's jellybean color preference to personality characteristics. Other notable presentations that year were an invited address entitled, "*Analyzing and Interpreting Facial Signals*" (APA, 1982); a symposium entitled, "*Scientific and Professional Contributions of Psychology to Air Safety*" (APA, 1982); a symposium entitled, "*Near Death Experiences*" (APA, 1982), which coincidentally predated any such appearances on the television talk show circuit; a symposium entitled, "*Do We Have To Harm Clients To Help Them ?*" (APA, 1982); and a poster session entitled, "*Empathy and the Muscular Dystrophy Telethon: Who Helps Jerry's Kids ?*" (APA, 1982).

Topics for symposia exist just about everywhere: on television talk shows; in news magazines; in professional journals; or in discussions between you and your colleagues. There are a number of relevant issues in

psychology that would make excellent symposium proposals: violence in children's cartoon television shows between generations (1960's versus 1990's, and this can be easily done now that the older shows are accessible on cable); a meta-analysis of "*Beavis & Butt-Head*" (but don't you dare take this topic....it's mine !!); difficulties or successes in obtaining good internships; point/counterpoint opinions on the necessity for post-doctoral residencies, additional credentialling, managed care systems, or prescription privileges; developing effective curriculum vitas; forecasting future trends and issues in psychology; how to obtain extramural funding and developing research programs; how to successfully get published; why psychology is not playing more of a role in health care administration; or standardizing clinical psychology doctoral programs with respect to credit hours, as some doctoral degrees in clinical psychology can be completed in a minimum of only 54 credit hours (University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee), while other programs require over 133 credit hours (Biola University).

All of these areas would make for interesting programs due to their timeliness and topicality, and interesting spins could be put on them to enhance the possibility of acceptance. Almost anything that has ever been questioned or has raised personal concern during your graduate studies would be fair game. You should easily come up with at least six relevant issues each year around which to build proposals. And, you might need to submit all six in order to get one acceptance, depending upon the convention theme(s); any divisional theme(s); and the amount of time or space available to a particular division.

The APA Annual Convention has a primary theme or themes each year. In addition, some divisions accepting program proposals may have their own

themes. For example, this year's convention theme is "*Psychology in an Era of Managed Health Care*" (APA, 1995). The last five convention themes have been: "*Cultural Diversity*" (APA, 1994); "*Biological Revolution*, and *Sex and Psychology*" (APA, 1993); "*Nature/Nurture*, and *Consciousness*" (APA 1992); "*Child Abuse and Neglect*, and *Contributions of Psychology to Learning and Education*" (APA, 1991); and "*Substance Abuse and Violence*, and the *Impact of the Media on Critical Social Issues*" (APA, 1990). Should your proposal fit within either the primary convention theme, or a division's theme, additional consideration would be given to your proposal. But, that does not always guarantee success. For example, I submitted a program proposal entitled, "*Managed Health Care Systems*: *Expanding Psychology's Role in Administration*", which met the primary convention theme this year, but was not accepted. The goal in this stage is to generate ideas, including some that may meet the primary theme. Your idea should only encompass one, maybe two primary ideas. If your proposal covers three or more ideas, you will run into a problem that will be discussed later in selecting the division to send your proposal.

Once enough ideas have been generated, giving the proposal a **title** is crucial. The title of a proposal may not exceed ten words. The title must specifically convey what your proposal contains. A good title will catch a reviewer's eyes and warrant some attention. The biggest error made in program proposals is having a title and content that reviewers feel do not match. For example, some colleagues and I submitted a program proposal to Division 17 (Counseling Psychology) for the 1993 Annual Convention on our experiences working in a university counseling center administered under the medical model. The proposal was entitled, "*Prevention in College Mental*

Health: Alternatives to the Medical Model". It was not accepted, as the reviewers felt the title and content did not match, and the content was "too negative". The proposal was resubmitted to the same division last year with the only change being a new title, "*Student Funded University Counseling Centers: Administrative Challenges for Year 2000*". The proposal was accepted. The title of a proposal needs to have good face validity, but it also needs to be catchy enough to attract attention and an audience. The title needs to convey the main idea, plus whatever spin is being put on the topic. If you are against a particular notion or movement in the profession, it is better to phrase the title with "*Critical Issues in.....*", "*Operational Challenges of.....*", as problems in the field are well known, but people are tired of hearing them unless you are also proposing a solution to the problems that has not appeared before.

Conducting a Literature Review

The literature review may well be your least time consuming activity in preparing a program proposal. If you have access to a library containing the CD-ROM data bases PsychLIT and ERIC systems, your literature search should only take about two hours. In fact, it is advised to run the most recent search that either system allows, which is typically "*1987 - present*". It is not necessary for you to do an elaborate literature search when submitting a program proposal, in contrast to submitting poster proposals.

The average poster session consists of presenting some research findings, along with a related literature review, meaning you have already done *all* the work and are now looking to present it to an audience. Submitting symposium proposals consists of writing up a limited literature review to expand your topic. This means you only have to do *part* of the work. If the

proposal is not accepted, you have not expended a great deal of time or energy on the project.

A literature review cannot be selectively exhaustive because program proposals can only contain a certain number of words. Therefore, the literature cannot be expounded upon at length. The purpose of the literature review is to provide some authoritative context for your proposal to support the position of your proposal. A good literature review will contain fifteen or fewer references. If a computer literature search is done, you can merely use the abstracts obtained in order to construct the program proposal. Should a couple of articles become a key element for a program proposal, then by all means track them down. The abstracts are basically all you need to further enhance your topic at the proposal stage. However, if your proposal is accepted, then get ready to do a full-blown literature search. But, there is no need to worry. There typically is six months between notification of an acceptance and the convention start date.

Preparing the Proposal

The instructions for preparing a program proposal are very easy and can be found in the September issue of the ***APA Monitor*** as a separate stapled insert titled, "*Call for Programs*". Take the insert out and keep it in a safe place ! The general rule for program proposals is to follow the instructions explicitly because it may enhance your proposal's being accepted.

A program proposal must contain a 300 word general statement about the program, and a 300 word summary from each participant in the program, although there can be some deviations from this by some divisions. This is not a great deal of writing, which is what makes program proposals relatively easy to do. But, 300 words is not all that much to convey what your part of a

presentation is about. If you submit a program proposal with two other participants, you are limited to only 1,200 words to describe in enough detail what you and the participants intend to do. Your proposal will have its merit judged on the basis of very little writing, so it is imperative to get to the point quickly. To illustrate how little writing is involved, using a font of *Times New Roman* at 14-pitch (in which this paper has been done), your program proposal will amount to about 1½ written pages for the general summary, plus references; and 1½ written pages, plus references, for each participant.

Once you complete the writing, the "*Call for Programs*" contains a blank form for submitting program or paper proposals. Since you will be submitting program proposals, make copies of both sides of the original program proposal form and fill in the requested information on both sides, including how much time you are requesting; either 50 minutes, or 1 hour and 50 minutes. On the front of this form, you will need to indicate a "*Chairperson*" for your program. The standard role of the chairperson is to introduce each speaker in your program and to keep an eye on the time so that your program runs smoothly and still allows time for questions by the audience. In some presentations, the chairperson may actually present a segment of the program. The only rule for chairpersons is that they must be a Member of the American Psychological Association. For those of you who are not full Members of APA, you will need a full Member either as one of your co-presenters, or to sign your proposal form as a "sponsor".

You will note a checklist on the back page of the form indicating what a completed proposal consists of: the completed and signed proposal form; five copies of the 300 word general statement; five copies of the 300 word summaries by each participant; and two self-addressed, stamped envelopes.

The "*Call for Programs*" will indicate the exact date your completed proposal must reach the divisional program chairperson, which is usually early in the first week of December. Your proposal must arrive before that date or it will not be reviewed. You may submit a proposal to only one division and you need not be a member of the division to which you are submitting a proposal.

Some time during January, you will receive the first self-addressed, stamped envelope from the APA division program chair letting you know that your proposal got there on time, provide your proposal with a reference number, and inform you when to expect a decision. Some divisions merely tell you that the proposal got there. In the middle of February, you will receive the second self-addressed, stamped envelope, letting you know whether your program was selected for inclusion or not. If the first word of text in this letter is "*Congratulations.....*", your program has made it in to the convention. If your proposal was rejected, do not despair, and do not throw that proposal away. Some divisions may include valuable feedback from the reviewers of your proposal that can be used later on.

Selecting a Division to Submit Your Proposal

The most important aspect in preparing an APA program proposal is which of the fifty divisions, plus APAGS, you should submit the proposal. If you select the right division, you might have a better success rate. There are two divisions that you may want to immediately exclude from your consideration, those being Divisions 29 (Psychotherapy); and 42 (Psychologists in Independent Practice), despite these divisions ranking third (6,576) and first (7,488) respectively in membership (APA, 1995).

The reason you may want to exclude these divisions is that each division offers their programming mainly as "conversation hours" held in Hospitality

Suites located in one of the main convention hotels. Each division's activities are promoted elsewhere within the *APA Convention Program*, meaning that anyone wanting to attend Division 29 or 42 activities must look deep into the *APA Convention Program* for times and locations. Since these activities are scheduled away from the main sites in each hotel, they have a greater opportunity of being poorly attended. In addition, the *APA Convention Program* lists a "Participant Index" in which the names of presenters appears in alphabetical order. If you submit a program proposal to Divisions 29 or 42, your name will not appear in the "Participant Index", which is one of the first places anyone would look in order to find out what and when you presented. At the 1994 Annual Convention, Division 29 held its "Hospitality Suite" in an upper floor room suite of the Los Angeles Hilton and Towers. On the opening Friday of the convention, Division 29 held five conversation hours between the hours of 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. The total attendance for these five conversation hours was **zero** !

The fifty APA divisions and APAGS are allotted only a certain number of hours of convention time to conduct its programs and its business meetings. The amount of convention time a division receives is either contingent upon the number of convention attendees indicating a specific divisional affiliation at the time they register for the convention, or is based upon the total number of members in the division. A division may find its convention time up one year and down the next. For example, in 1992, Division 2 (Teaching of Psychology) was allocated only twenty-six total hours to conduct its programs and its business meetings. Two hours were used to hold business meetings, which only left Division 2 with twenty-four hours of program time. Division 2 contains approximately 1,914 members, and is typically able to

offer a total of ten to fourteen symposia each year. On the other hand, Division 12 (Clinical Psychology) has 6,534 members, and is accorded far more convention hours for programming.

One way to determine which of the APA divisions to submit a proposal to is to look at the journal or newsletter of each, especially any issue in which the division's annual meeting is reported. A typically reported division business item is how many proposals were submitted for the Annual Convention and what percentage were accepted. In the 1995 Annual Convention, Division 17 (Counseling Psychology) reported receiving nearly 365 total proposals, including poster sessions, and 65% of the proposals were accepted for the convention. I learned about this from Division 17's rejection letter to me regarding a program proposal I sent in to them for review.

If your proposal is very specialized and specific, such as "*Clinical Psychology Curriculum for the 21st Century*", it would make sense to submit it to Division 12 (Clinical Psychology). A problem will exist if you decide to propose a program on "*MMPI Forensic Implications in Multiple Chemical Sensitivity Syndrome*", as this program covers three issues: the MMPI; forensic psychology; and multiple chemical sensitivity syndrome. A proposal such as this could be sent to Division 12; Division 13; Division 17; Division 22 (Rehabilitation Psychology); Division 34 (Population & Environmental Psychology); Division 38 (Health Psychology); and Division 41 (Psychology and the Law). What you must determine is which division your topic fits the best. If your topic fits more than one division, then indicate on your program proposal form that your topic warrants co-sponsorship by another or other APA divisions, and list the appropriate divisions so that the program chair is aware that multiple sponsorship is a possibility.

What if Your Proposal is Accepted ?

If your program proposal is accepted, you will have approximately six months in which to complete a literature search and to write up a rough draft of what you are going to present in your program. Presuming you have co-presenters as part of your program, it is best for all of you to prepare rough drafts of your sections of the program. It is recommended that you try to have your presentation rough drafts completed before the end of spring semester. That way, you all are still on campus and can confer during the preparation of your rough draft. It is advised that a final draft of each presentation be done during the summer and that your panel or team meets or talks at least once prior to the August convention date to smooth out any rough spots. If your proposal calls for a "discussant", or someone to provide a reaction statement to the overall presentation, make sure to send that person the final drafts of all the presentations. Make at least three copies of your final draft, either in print or on floppy disk. Keep a copy at home; one at work; and one in your car, so if anything unexpected happens you will still have access to your completed work.

A primary guideline for presenting symposia is for each of the participants to interact with the audience rather than read to them. However, there is one situation in which you may want to read to your audience. Each of the four APA Directorates (Science; Education; Practice; and Public Information) holds a "mini-convention", which consists of the top rated submissions from divisions comprising each of the Directorates. If your program becomes part of a "mini-convention", there is a chance your program might be selected for audiotaping by APA. Under that circumstance, you may want to read your presentation to the audience so those unable to attend your program and

desire to purchase the tape from APA will hear a very organized program. If you are selected for audiotaping, you will find either a fixed microphone, or a lapel-clip microphone on or near the lectern. Make sure you use the microphone, and please repeat audience questions into the microphone so that the questions and answers can get on tape. If you are selected for audiotaping, you and your co-presenters receive a complimentary copy of the tape which can be picked up somewhere near the main registration area shortly after you finish presenting your program.

What To Do With Proposal Rejections

If you learn only one thing from this presentation and paper, may it be that even if your program proposal is rejected, it is not dead. Not by a long shot ! To put a rejection in proper perspective, look at the basic facts about the APA Annual Convention. Twenty percent of the convention is comprised of invited addresses, workshops, and awards ceremonies. Nearly forty percent of the total presenters are giving poster sessions. Your program proposal is already in elite company just by merely submitting it. After all, you are competing with other program proposers trying to get accepted to appear in the remaining convention time slots.

Therefore, you have an excellent chance of getting a rejection letter, if for no other reason than a lack of time slots. Receiving a rejection letter should not cause you any undue professional embarrassment or shame. After all, without rejections, you would have to create six new topics for the next year's "*Call for Programs*". In fact, rejections will make sure that you have multiple proposals to submit for the next year, as some years, good new topics can be hard to generate. This leads to my concept, as well as practice, of "*recycling your own waste*" !

As stated earlier, some divisions (Division 17) may provide you with reviewer feedback on your proposal, while others (Division 12) will not. The reviewer feedback will give you some ideas why your proposal did not get included in the convention. Presuming you have saved your program proposals on disk, you can immediately start revising them and/or retitling them for next year's Annual Convention. There is a strong chance that if next year's divisional program chairperson is the same, the proposal reviewers will be different than those who rejected you. All you need to do is revise or retitle your proposals and send them in during the "*Call for Programs*" for the next year. Once you have revised and/or retitled your program proposal, take another look at what division might be the best fit for that proposal, as sending it to another division can lead to its acceptance.

Do not let the fear of rejection stop you from submitting program proposals. Out of six program proposal submissions sent in for the 1995 APA Annual Convention, I received a total of five rejection letters. One of the rejections represented the third time that particular proposal had been turned down, after originally being submitted in 1993, revised and retitled in 1994, and sent to a different division in 1995. Another of the rejections represented the second time that particular proposal had been rejected, after being revised and sent to a different division in 1995. The other three rejections were from first-time proposal submissions. It is planned to revise all five and send them to different divisions in response to the 1996 "*Call for Programs*". As soon as the 1996 "*Call for Programs*" hits the mailbox, I will already have five revised and/or retitled program proposals completed and ready to mail out almost immediately. All I will need to do is carefully look at which divisions might the proposals fit. Already prepared multiple

submissions means that I must only come up with one new topic for 1996, since I have obviously exhausted this current presentation.

Now, for those of you who might be wondering, this program was accepted on its first submission to APAGS. Starting at the Centennial Convention in 1992, this is the sixth program I have presented at an APA Annual Convention. Four of the six programs were accepted on the first submission. But, to get those six programs accepted, I have submitted a total of twenty program proposals from 1992 on, giving me a 30% acceptance rate. There is no reason you cannot do the same, or even better. You will have occasions in which a proposal is just not accepted, no matter how much you re-write it or retitle it. But, even then, it still is not dead !

Protecting "Ownership" of a Rejected Proposal

In the unlikely event you decide to give up on a proposal because it was not accepted three or four years in a row, it may be important for you to get something for the effort you put in to the proposal. It may also be necessary for you to gain "ownership" of your topic so that the concept has your name on it just in case any authorship difficulties ever arise in the future.

It is recommended you expand your part of the proposal into a small paper, perhaps seven to ten pages in length. Submit that paper to the ERIC/CASS data base system for evaluation. ERIC/CASS is an acronym for Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse/Counseling and Student Services. ERIC/CASS publishes *Resources in Education*, a monthly journal containing abstracts of unsolicited and/or unpublished papers, presentations, scientific reports, etc., in the counseling and student services area. ERIC/ CASS abstracts can also be found as on-line CD-ROM in many university libraries, and is considered a "refereed publication". All ERIC/CASS needs

from you is two clean and readable copies of the paper, along with a signed release form. You mail the copies of the paper and the release form in to ERIC/CASS, and the evaluation process begins. If your submission is accepted, you will be notified of a temporary document number, and later be given a permanent document number. The submission will be abstracted and appear in one of the future issues of *Resources in Education*, and you will be given a copy on microfiche. So, while you may not get to present a program, you might be able to get your segment of the program "published". Or, you and your co-presenters could opt to submit it to ERIC/CASS as a group. Generally, it is better for each of you to try submitting your program segments to ERIC/ CASS as a sole author. But, the individual segments of your program might not be able to stand on their own merits. At that time, it would have to be considered a group submission. If the submission is accepted, you can check the *American Psychological Association Publication Manual, 4th Edition* (1994) on how to reference ERIC/CASS documents on your curriculum vita.

This concludes my segment of this program. Before I turn the program over to my co-presenters, Toni Morgan, Heidi Storm, and Julie Miller, from the Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, I do hope this program will start your wheels in motion so you and your colleagues will consider putting together program proposals of your own for future APA Annual Conventions. Your faculty should be more than willing to either present with you, or sponsor your proposal. And, please let me know how your proposals fare, or if there is any additional assistance I can provide you. I look forward to attending *your* programs in the years to come.

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